Information Brief

School-Wide Discipline

Littleton, Jonesboro, Paducah, Springfield, Santee – These are communities forever associated with shocking shootings of students by students. Everyone speculates on the cause of such horrendous behavior and how to prevent it. Suggestions for solutions range from turning schools into fortresses, to blaming but doing nothing. At the same time, discipline has become a primary concern of teachers, administrators, school boards, parents, and communities. In addition to apprehension about student misconduct, there are concerns about low levels of student achievement, school dropouts, high rates of absenteeism, and individuals ill-prepared for the world of work. Inadequate instruction most often receives the blame, yet activities other than instruction occupy almost one-half of all classroom time. Discipline problems are responsible for a significant portion of this lost instructional time.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS ADDRESSED: *School staff, families and community develop, communicate, and support clearly defined, appropriate high behavioral expectations. All key stakeholders develop and implement school-wide proactive disciplinary plans that promote respectful, responsible behavior.*

INTRODUCTION

There is no quick fix for these complex problems. Among other researchers, Geoff Colvin of the University of Oregon's College of Education and co-developer of Project PREPARE, a model for classroom and school-wide discipline, states that the solution requires a multi-dimensional approach (Colvin, 1994). This necessarily includes long-term planning, adequate funding, adequate commitment of time, emphasis on preventive rather than reactive measures and the collaboration of schools, families, and community. We have to begin some place, and that place can be making our schools healthier, with environments where every student matters and where every student can acquire the skills to succeed at school and in life. This investment now is an investment in our future.

> *"If all schools do is add guards or metal detectors or put students in uniforms or expel them, it won't work…You don't change a kid's behavior by expelling him. The real solution is to teach students how to think, how to act, how to deal with their anger. Maybe that wasn't the job of schools in 1950, but it sure is now."*
>
> *- Kevin Dwyer, Assistant Director of the National Association of School Psychologists*

Dr. Kevin Dwyer, Assistant Director of the National Association of School Psychologists, distinguishes between making the physical environment safe and making the psychological environment both safe and instructional. Of course, the former is important; but the latter is crucial. In order to have a psychologically safe environment, schools and communities need to make changing the school's climate and culture a priority. A school-wide system of discipline can help create such an environment and foster the healthy personal-social development of students while it supports their acquisition of academic knowledge and skills.

DISCIPLINE – WHAT IS IT?

Discipline encourages learning, responsibility, and self-control. *Webster's New World College Dictionary* defines *discipline* as "From the Latin meaning: 1. A branch of knowledge or learning; 2. Training that develops self-control, character, orderliness or efficiency; 3. Strict control to enforce obedience; 4. Treatment that controls or punishes; 5. A system of rules."

The theme that runs through all five definitions is that of "control." The "control" that undergirds the first two definitions is the development of self-control through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and habits. The next three definitions speak to control coming from external sources.

Traditionally, our society has thought of school discipline as a system of rules designed to control or punish in order to enforce obedience. In fact, current research and experience tell us that such systems work only temporarily and only as long as students are under the threat of the punishment. Often such systems only serve to escalate or encourage disrespectful and rebellious behavior.

> *Effective discipline is discipline that is instructional, contributing to a student's overall healthy development, socially, emotionally, intellectually, and behaviorally.*

Discipline should be future-oriented and relationship enhancing. When it is, discipline develops self-control by supporting young people to acquire the

pro-social knowledge, skills, and habits that will help them succeed.

SCHOOL CULTURE

To create a school culture where the environment is welcoming, invitational, supportive, and tolerant, means that the school must engage in deep systemic change. The knowledge, skills, and attitudes of students, staff, families, and communities are all part of the mix that determines what the school is like. If a school uses a more traditional model of discipline (i.e., a set of rules and punishing consequences), then those who use this approach and those impacted by it must be supported to learn a new way of doing business. This means putting the structures and processes in place so that the school can become a learning community with a collaborative rather than competitive culture. As schools work on development of their school-wide systems, a set of critical elements, grounded in the professional literature, identifies factors that contribute to their becoming places where all kids can succeed (See those elements in another section of this Handbook).

DEVELOPING A PLAN

In order to develop a plan for school-wide student discipline:

- Begin by establishing a leadership team composed of school staff (instructional and support), students, families, and community members.

- Train the team in such skills as planning, facilitation of effective meetings, group decision-making, managing change, and building commitment. Attention to team building is a critical aspect of this phase.

- Once a leadership team is established, involve the rest of the school staff (teachers, school secretary, the guidance counselor, the janitor, cooks) as well as students, their families, and other community members in making decisions about the design and implementation of the plan. Dividing school staff into study teams is an organizational structure that serves this purpose well.

In an article in *The American School Board Journal,* (1993, February) Joseph Williams, former school administrator, likens developing a school-wide

disciplinary system to building a house. He stresses the importance of laying the foundation of the system. This foundation includes a set of shared beliefs, shared visions of a successful school and a successful student, and the school's mission. An ill-conceived disciplinary plan without this solid foundation has little chance of succeeding.

Components of a Successful School-wide System

- A set of beliefs, a vision, and mission that state what behaviors are valued and important.

- Total staff commitment to manage student behavior based on an agreed upon approach.

- School-wide attention to the treatment of *all* persons with respect, concern, and fairness.

- A set of clearly defined, widely communicated high and clear expectations for behavior.

- A programmatic effort to help students gain skills in positive social relationships and conflict management.

- A set of well-defined, equitably enacted consequences and clear, fair procedures for students who break the rules.

- A dynamic instructional program that engages students in meaningful, authentic learning that motivates and generates motivation and learning.

- K.D. Peterson, "Establishing Effective School-wide Behavior Management and Discipline Systems," Reform Talk, October 1998

Researchers have found that the most beneficial programs are *comprehensive* and *multi-faceted,* with an *integrated approach* to cognitive, affective, and behavioral skill development. Such programs address those factors that put children at risk and give them access to the protective factors that enhance their ability to resist negative influences. They are most effective when they are an *integral* part of the curriculum and day-to-day life in the school rather than isolated add-ons.

SUMMARY

Disciplinary systems that work are *coordinated efforts* with families, students, educators, and community members. They bring together efforts with a common mission to foster students' healthy personal-social development.

LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:
- **Web site for *Success4:***
  – OSEP Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) – http://www.pbis.org
- **In this Handbook:** See *Early Warning Timely Response* (Section 2), *Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide* (Chapters 2 & 5), "*Success4* Critical Elements," *Crisis Management Section: "Templates for Designing a School-wide Proactive Discipline System,"* and the Resources Section.